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THE DRAMA IN ICELAND

A SKETCH

Historically, the drama of Iceland is of very recent origin, dating from the last decades of the 18th century, when dramatic representations spontaneously grew up in the Gymnasium (Latin School) of Reykjavík, the capital. It will be easily understood however, that, essentially, it is an imported art. It stands to reason, whatever enthusiasts on the subject have said to the contrary, that, by its very nature, the drama can attain independent and legitimate growth only in larger centers of human habitation where the stage, necessarily, epitomizes the tendencies of the times, and, if occupied by a real literature, is in every sense, the true self-expression of the community. As late as 1886, a sober-minded author on Scandinavian literature was able to say, with some justice: "Iceland lacks all conditions for a dramatic literature". And the situation has not changed essentially since. Whatever has been done in that line is to all intents and purposes due to stimulation from abroad and in that sense artificial.

Even now dramatic art is under a heavy handicap in Iceland as compared with other lands where a literary revival has taken strong hold of the theatre, notably, Ireland. Up to very recently, there did not exist a single theatre adapted to staging real plays. In Reykjavík, a town of some ten thousand inhabitants, there are now two play-houses, the larger one seating some 400 people; in Akureyri, with some 3000-4000, there is one; and several other towns have at least some hall that will do for occasional representations. It goes without saying that the actors are exclusively amateurs, drilled, in the most favorable cases, by some actor whom chance has drifted to these lonely shores. These companies are said to enjoy a uniformly flourishing existence; and, whether good or bad, the play is always well patronized; for impecunious as the Icelander is, he always has enough to defray the running expenses, and no one is too poor to indulge in the rare luxury of seeing a play.

These are the restricted conditions the would-be Icelandic

dramatist has to reckon with. It is a difficult matter for him to get his play printed before it has been accepted and tried out by these companies of amateurs who, sincere and enthusiastic though they be, naturally steer clear of plays with many persons and especially of those with difficult or erotic scenes. Many of the actors may be well-read enough and possess good taste, but possibly have never been abroad—may never have seen a play staged and acted on a larger scene. Hence, the usual choice—even in the capital, is the light comedy, notwithstanding the fact that the Icelander is of a decidedly reflective character which does not recoil from the tragic. And if, undaunted by all these obstacles, the Icelander tries his hand at this genre, he is promptly met with the formidable competition of foreign comedy. And supposing he succeeds in spite of all, what of it? When authors of small nations, such as Denmark and Holland have been known to complain about the limited circle they can hope to reach, how true, how pathetically true is this of Iceland, with its fourscore thousand inhabitants of poor fishermen and farmers! What an audience can an author expect there? Nor is it to be thought for a moment that his very difficult language will permit comprehension of his work among the reading public of the other Scandinavian countries.

All honor to the men who, by writing dramas in their mother-tongue, are willing to forego the emolument and recognition to be gained from audiences in more favored lands, for the sake of enriching their native literature and showing both the world and their own people that neither in this art are they inferior to other nations.

Three authors divide the honors in this field, Matthías Jochumsson, Indriði Einarsson, and Jóhann Sigurjónsson.

Matthías Jochumsson, now in the seventies, is a many-sided and richly endowed poet. Born in the most humble circumstances, he studied for the ministry and is now one of the best known divines in Iceland, as such having been chosen to represent his country at the Chicago Congress of Religions. Notwithstanding the arduousness of his profession in a geographically extensive diocese, he has found time to unfold an astonishing literary activity. Even now, poems

of all kinds, translations (he has made masterly translations of Shakespeare's great dramas, of Byron, Burns, Longfellow, Tegnér, Bjørnson, Ibsen) articles of every description continue to flow from his ever-ready pen. Above all, however, is he the warm-hearted lyric poet, gifted with a Bjørnsonian ability to speak and appeal to every heart, and with a magnificent mastery of his instrument.

It was in the early sixties that a number of amateurs in Reykjavík combined to perform the first work of national importance, Matthías Jochumsson's *Útileggumenn* (The Outlaws)—a folk-piece in the manner of that charming Danish Romantic poet, Hertz, and the earliest work of Ibsen. In a harmless parlor-fashion, a gang of picturesquely dangerous robbers is invested with a halo of romance through which, in more than one place, Schiller's *Robbers* is seen clearly enough. Technically, the play is lamentably weak. Its extraordinary success and lasting influence is due to several causes. Chiefly, I imagine, to the magnificent beauty of the songs and lyrical passages interspersed. As in so much of the rich lyrical literature of Iceland in modern times, natural scenery is a subject of paramount and independent interest, reflecting the average Iceland's unusual susceptibility to beauties of Nature. The dramatic landscapes of his strange native isle—its grand glaciers whelming even the tallest mountains; the formidable and never-resting Arctic Ocean; the roaring, icy torrents; the terrible deserts of lava and sand; the wildly flung lines of smouldering volcanoes—and, embosomed amid these contending terrors, peaceful paradises of green, pastoral valleys, with grazing herds and smoking chimneys—all this found frequent and moving expression in Matthías Jochumssons poetry and aroused, and for that matter still arouses, the enthusiasm of his countrymen to a high pitch. Add to this that the early sixties witnessed a strong growth of national sentiment, culminating in the year 1874, when the little nation obtained a constitution separate from that of the Danish overlords; and, last but not least, with impressionable and unsophisticated folk who had never seen modern decorations: the scenery was painted by that excellent artist, Sigurður Guðmundsson, the

creator of the national female costume of Iceland—which scenery, by the way, is said to do service still. But notwithstanding the several hundred representatives the play has enjoyed, its greatest importance, after all, consisted in that it stimulated powerfully the productivity of others and in creating a demand for native work.

Of the half dozen plays of Matthías Jochumsson that followed it will suffice to mention the best, and at the same time most ambitious, the sagadrama *Jón Árason*, treating of a portentous chapter in Icelandic history. The subject of the large, in fact, somewhat unwieldy, drama is the heroic life and tragic death of the warlike bishop Jón Árason who seeks to oppose by power of arms the introduction of Protestantism in Iceland, and with it, the power of the Danish king Christian the Third. Notwithstanding his initial good fortune, the undertaking fails in the end, thanks to his untimely magnanimity. In the construction of the drama, the poet seems to have planned an increase of dramatic tension up to the very moment of the catastrophe which he has succeeded in making a truly impressive and gorgeous scene. After capturing the bishop, the representative of the king has him condemned to death in a mock-trial. But the populace is friendly to him. His friends try in vain to persuade him to flee. In the night before the execution, the heroic lover of his daughter * enters the dungeon, beseeching the old man to grant him absolution for his intended murder of the king's representative. But the bishop is prepared to obey wholly what he regards as his call and to die a martyr's death for his faith and his country. And thus on the morrow he walks forth with firm step through the ranks of his silent enemies toward the place of execution, accompanied by his two sons who of their own will join him in death, while in the background an eruption of Hekla colors the sky a bloody red and the awful chant of *dies irae* is intoned by the monks in the cathedral.

More gifted by far as a dramatist—however narrowly circumscribed his poetic talents otherwise are—is Matthías Jochumsson's follower, Indriði Einarsson. Unfortunately for his

* Celibacy was not the rule among the Catholic clergy of Iceland.

development, he abandoned at a critical period of growth the poetic career which he has but lately resumed. At present, he is Chief Statistician of Iceland and a very busy man, finding time only at intervals to receive the visits of the Muse. He has the great advantage over his older colleague that he is well acquainted with the theatre and its needs; both from his stay in Copenhagen, and his long experience as stage-manager and director of the theatre at Reykjavík. His first works, written while still a student, are wholly in the realm of the Romantic drama. *Hellismenn* (Robbers) directly owes its existence to the inspiration of *Útileggumenn* and, likewise, betrays strong influence from Schillers earliest plays (which must have been favorite reading among the Gymnasiasts) and is saturated with hyper-romantic ideals of love and loyalty. But for some reason it does not equal *Útileggumenn* in originality and freshness. *Njárnóttin*, on the other hand—a folklore and fairy play—is a lovely piece, full of humor and robust realism, and what is best, thoroughly Icelandic in treatment and coloring. Unfortunately, again, the plot is all too slight to carry the weight of no less than 182 pages of most diverse matter. I pass over several other Romantic dramas of this period. When reaching Copenhagen, there to complete his economic studies, the poet found himself in a totally different atmosphere. Realism was in the ascendancy, and the shock of the change robbed him temporarily of his voice.

His next drama, which appeared after an interval of ten years, is a full-fledged 'social drama'. Its title is *Skipið sekkur*—the Ship is Sinking. Ibsen's influence is written in full on every page of it—the very title with its symbolic meaning reminds one of him: a home, the life of a whole family, is about to be disrupted and to be swallowed up in moral chaos. The subject is taken from every-day middle life in the capital, an unhappy marriage, a ruined life. The 'problem' to be solved is: may a woman, after twenty years of marriage with a man who has forfeited her respect and love, desert her husband and follow the lover of her youth—without regard to her duties toward her daughter and the opinion of society. The solution, likewise, is typically Ibsenian, reminding one

strongly of the *Lady from the Sea*. While not denying for a moment the very considerable merits of this play which ought to prove a success on any stage, I do not grant that it is independent art, in the highest sense of that term—a criticism, to be sure, which may be levelled with equal justice at a vast amount of similar productions in other lands. It is a mere accident that these people talk Icelandic in an Icelandic shop or drawing room. They really are at home anywhere and everywhere; though upon closer inspection they bear an embarrassing family resemblance to the Kleinbürger of Ibsen's plays. Hence, with all respect for many excellencies in dialogue and action, the whole seems rather a wasted effort if the intention was to create something different from what has been done and is being done all over modern Christendom.

It may have been this very thought which led Indriði Einarsson to return to a subject which, taken from Icelandic history, offered a chance of treating an Icelandic subject in an Icelandic manner. This his latest production, entitled *Sverð og Bagall** (Sword and Crozier), I consider the best sagadrama so far produced in Iceland and a respectable effort from any point of view. The action was suggested by two or three rather meagre pages of the *Islendingasaga* of Sturla Thórðarson. To my notion, the poet has succeeded admirably in reproducing the cool coloring, the ironic-pessimistic attitude, that uncompromisingly masculine element we know so well in its refreshing acerbity from the best sagas. In conformity are also the terse, pithy language, the immense repression and restraint of manner; and the equally succinct manner of character-drawing.

It would have required a more than human gift of prophecy to predict, from the two earlier plays of Jóhann Sigurjónsson, that his third drama named *Fjalla-Eyvindur* would be the strongest one so far written by an Icelander, in fact, a great drama, showing poetic and dramatic powers of the highest order. There is an astounding growth of power which it

* Translated by the author in *Poet Lore* for 1912, where there is also given a fuller account of both author and play. There exist also Danish and German versions.

would be difficult to account for, unless the author's youth—he is born in 1880—rendered it probable that he is only now finding himself. The first, at least, *Dr. Rung* is almost negligible as tending to show a new dramatic individuality. *Bóndinn á Hrauni* ('The Peasant') also is a rather slight effort. The subject is a peasant's passionate attachment to the home and soil that have been handed down through generations and which finally comes in conflict with his daughter's—his only child's—love for one who in her father's eyes is but a vagrant, a wandering botanist, and who—we are to assume—will not keep land and home 'in the family'. An earthquake half destroys the home; and when the father understands that the lover's will is stronger than his own, like a second Samson he buries himself under the ruins of the farm. In regard to the analysis of character and the motivation of action, this little three-act play is as yet quite immature; but the incidental description of Icelandic life and nature is attractive and the all-pervading horror of the impending catastrophe heralds the coming master of dramatic atmosphere.

Fjalla-Eyvindur (Eyvind of the Mountains) originally composed in Danish at once aroused wide attention. Like Matthías Jochumsson's *Útileggumenn* and Indriði Einarsson's *Hellismenn*, it deals with the outlaws in the inner deserts of Iceland—a subject of national scope and interest ever since the *Grettissaga* wrought itself into the minds of the people, and very naturally so. Iceland had no feudal age, has no hard and fast divisions of society by race or faith or wealth. Hence, the romantic figure of the outlaw has been one of the very few possible cases where a tragic fate quickened the imagination and sympathy of the simple folk. He is half outcast, half superman, one who dares to defy commonplace human society and, depending upon his own strength, to build up his solitary kingdom in the desert.

The magnificently endowed Eyvind has fled from justice in the South Quarter of Iceland. After a year of outlawry in the mountains he risks coming down into the North Quarter where under an assumed name he enters the service of the wealthy and high-minded widow Halla. By his manliness and

ability he wins her confidence and finally her love. At the same time he arouses the jealousy and avarice of her brother-in-law Bjørn, the most powerful man in the district, who himself wishes to obtain her hand and land. He discovers Eyvind's identity and ruthlessly pursues his ends until Eyvind is compelled to flee back into outlawry, whither Halla follows him, sacrificing all else. For seven happy years they eke out a scanty yet tolerable existence between the lava-rocks and glaciers of the Kjalveg. At last, the indefatigable Bjørn discovers their hiding-place and makes a murderous onslaught. Sacrificing their little child, they escape to the outer desert to more wretched privation still. Here, in a miserable earth-hut, we find them in the last act. It is Easter, but a terrible snow-storm has been raging interminably. Their provisions have given out and they look forward to slow starvation. Frantic with hunger and wretchedness, their souls become mutinous. They pitilessly dissect their lives and love, and there ensues a frightful duel of love and hate which they end by seeking death together in the storm.

These few words by way of synopsis can give no idea of the passionate life throbbing through the play. The dialogue is lithe and tense and telling, relieved here and there by poetic touches that give sure evidence of a powerful imagination working in a world all its own. Above all, the construction is well-nigh faultless in its grandly simple lines. To sum up, both in conception and execution *Fjalla-Eyvind* is decidedly a work of original merit and literary value. There are, at present in Scandinavia few dramatic talents of such promise as this young Iclander.

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